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Exploring the relationship between discourse and a practice perspective on HRD in a virtual environment.

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Abstract

This paper presents an exploration of how Human Resource Development (HRD) practices are ‘talked in to being’ in discussion events held in an open online environment. The discursive strategies of actors in such open virtual spaces are examined as a means to analyse how HRD practitioners collectively discuss and define what they do. Reflecting much of the research literature, this exploration found that a common definition of HRD remains elusive and that HRD as a practical concept is fluid and expansive. The analysis of the specific discussion events found that the discourses of practitioners have moved away from the common binary structuring between U.S. and European ‘Schools’ of HRD. The findings presented here suggest that HRD practices are elastic, contested and unstable and that the discursive strategies of practitioners seek to negotiate points of consensus and stability drawing on components of both Schools. Furthermore, the discussion event clearly positions HRD practice as being in a largely self-created crisis that emphasises a failure to meet the expectations of management or to respond to changes in the ‘business’ environment.

Keywords: discourse analysis; identity; online discussion; Twitter

Introduction

This paper explores how Human Resource Development (HRD) practices are negotiated and assembled in particular networks of practitioners engaged in discursive interactions

(Fenwick 2010) in open online environments: in this case, Twitter. The discursive strategies of such practitioners in open virtual spaces are examined as a means to analyse how HRD practitioners collectively discuss and define what they do. Given the difficulties associated with defining the theoretical foundations and practices of HRD (McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson 2001; Stewart and Sambrook 2012; Lee 2001; Walton 2003), this paper focuses on how these practitioners formulate and frame HRD in terms of both their own individual practices but also as a collective endeavour. The findings presented here suggest that HRD practices are elastic, contested and unstable and this reflects the discursive practices of practitioners who seek to negotiate points of consensus and stability in talking their profession 'in to being'. The study explores how competing projections of practice emerge and are 'processed' in ways that construct community coherence through collaborative meaning-making actions.

Human Resource Development: a practice and discursive perspective

It is widely recognized that defining the domain of HRD is problematic (McGuire 2011; Gold, et al 2010; Lee 2001). As Gold and others (2010) summarize, the label, 'human resource development' is principally an academic one referring to a domain of enquiry that is itself ill-defined. Stewart and Sambrook (2012) discuss HRD as a constantly expanding domain of practice and, arguably, this expansion generates such a breadth of definition as to render the term itself meaningless (Lee 2001; Lee 2010).

In their analysis of the definitions of HRD, McGuire and others (2001, 7) summarize the two broad 'schools' of HRD theory: a unitarist and utilitarian U.S School and a more pluralist European School as:

Table 1: Schools of HRD theory

U.S School	European School
Developmental focus	Strategic focus
Managerialist bottom-line approach	Interpretative Holistic approach
Emphasis on learning processes	Emphasis on skills acquisition
Organisational orientation	Individual orientation
Structured learning methodology	Philosophy for investing in people
Utilitarian outlook	Humanist outlook
Directly managed	Indirectly managed
Outcome focused	Process focused
Unitarist perspective	Pluralist perspective
Formal/ instructional	Informal/ formal
Cognitive view of learning	Constructivistic view of learning

Source: McGuire et al (2001, 7)

This binary approach to the analysis of HRD is used here as a pragmatic mechanism for the structuring of discussions on the theories and practices of HRD.

The unitarist approach of the U.S. School (Garavan, Gunnigle and Morley 2000) emerges from a broadly economic discourse and can be summarized as focused on outcomes in terms of performance improvement in an organization (Corley and Eades 2006). The European School is arguably more concerned with humanistic and emancipatory notions of learning (Trehan and Rigg 2011).

However, as McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson (2001, 347) discuss, HRD is historically defined by practice rather than specific theoretical concepts. This

perspective reflects that of Dirkx's statement that: "At the heart of the field of HRD ... is professional practice" (2008, 264) and that HRD research should be grounded in the "narrative of practice" (2008, 266). From this standpoint, HRD as both a domain of practice and of enquiry is founded on pragmatism: an epistemology of action (Cook and Brown 2005) where knowledge of the HRD domain is concerned with knowing 'how' rather than 'knowing that' (Spender 2005; Kivenen and Ristela 2003) so aligning with the theoretical area of practice (Bourdieu 1977; Antonacopoulou 2006). The focus of this paper, however, is not on practices as the micro-analysis of individual and group activities (Balogun, Huff, and Johnson 2003; Johnson, Melin and Whittington 2003). Rather, the concern here is with epistemic-normative practices (Gherardi 2000) that involve complex interactions between people, artefacts, language, collaboration and control (Nicolini, Gherardi and Yanow 2003; Guzman 2009) that enable the construction of knowledge, knowing and identity.

This grounding in practice can be said to underpin the disputed nature of HRD theory (McLean and McLean 2001; Lee 2001) as practices have evolved to 'draw in' a ever increasing range of concepts including lifelong learning, the psychological contract, employee engagement etc. as well as reflecting changes in work contexts such as the expansion of the contract workforce (McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson 2001; Garavan, et al 2007; Lee 2001; Callaghan and de Davila 2004). Thus, McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson (2001, 350) argue for defining HRD in terms of a hologram metaphor that:

... enables the reconciliation of intrinsic confusions and the contradictions of conceptual, theoretical and empirical identities of HRD.

The role of the hologram metaphor is central in presenting the different theories, concepts and practices of HRD in all their contradictions and tensions while simultaneously allowing the 'looker' to see what they are looking for but also having

the potential to 'see the other side' of the phenomenon (McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson 2001, 351). Hence, the hologram metaphor simultaneously presents HRD as being restrictive, by reflecting back what the viewer is seeking to see, and expansive, by providing opportunities for the viewer to perceive new ways of seeing HRD.

The hologram metaphor suggest how HRD as a concept and practice holds together despite the tensions between, for example, an organizational 'performance' focus and a concern with individual learning (Garavan, Gunnigle and Morley 2000) valued for 'developmental' or emancipatory outcomes (Trehan and Rigg 2011). Others suggest HRD can be understood as a bridging concept underpinning relations between the individual and the organization in a wider context of rapid organizational and societal change (Jorgensen and Henriksen 2011; Lee 2010).

The hologram metaphor is also mirrored in the 'linguistic turn' in HRD research (Francis 2007). Expanding on this 'linguistic turn' and drawing on Gergen (1995), Lawless and others (2011) suggest that the practice of HRD is constituted by discourse between actors that construct inter-subjective meanings from that practice. The discourses of HRD are not independent descriptions of what constitutes practice but rather compete with one another, so that the practices of HRD are unstable and highly contingent on the specific situation within which the practice is taking place. In turn, the discourses of HRD are materialized in HRD planning documents, learning management systems, performance management systems, learning materials, spaces of practice and workplace routines and common operating procedures.

Hence the professional knowledge of the HRD practitioner cannot be conceived in terms of a stable and external 'body of knowledge', a widely agreed set of resources and practices to be applied to a problem-situation, but is inherently changeable, fluid, contested and contingent (Fenwick, Jensen and Nerland 2012). What Keenoy (1999, 3)

found in respect of human resource management can be applied to HRD as a domain that:

...does not even encompass a set of coherent managerial practices; it is merely a map of what has turned out to be an ever-expanding territory.

But the idea of a stable body of professional knowledge is not easy to abandon given expectations from both practitioners and from the wider public of some form of common knowledge resources. Professional practice is often understood in terms of the reproduction of a body of common knowledge (Mäkitalo 2012). Hence HRD, as with other areas of ‘management’ knowledge and practice, faces a tension between the expectation of generalizable and immutable practices and the realities of the contingent, fluid and flexible nature of actual practice (Gabriel 2002).

Lawless and others (2011) found that through discursive and interactional practices, HRD actors seek to establish regulatory regimes of experts, practitioners and academics. Such regimes work towards establishing meaning-making networks that enable the interpretation of activities through common discursive repertoires, ways of talking about professional practice. As Trehan and Rigg (2011) argue that an organization can be perceived as a “network of shared meaning” constituted through social interactions, so a profession can be understood as being constituted around a shared language.

Discourse Analysis and professional discourses

Discourse analysis is concerned with the study of “language in use” (Nunan 1993, 7) operating at a number of levels (Phillips and Hardy 2002; Fairclough 2003; Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009). Given the purpose of this study in exploring how HRD practitioners collectively discuss and define what they do, an interpretive structuralist (Phillips and Hardy 2002) approach to discourse analysis was adopted. Taking a social

constructionist perspective, interpretive structuralism is concerned with how social discourses within a specific context emerge as sense-making and legitimation strategies around particular practices (Phillips and Hardy 2002, 25). This approach to discourse analysis is concerned with the construction of discourses that move beyond the re-description of day-to-day practices (Geiger 2009).

Heracleous (2006) identifies two over-lapping levels of discourse: communicative actions based on interactions between individuals to, for example, share experiences or build relations; and deeper discursive structures that 'guide' and regulate those communicative actions. While Mäkitalo (2012) argues that professional discursive practices are indivisible from professional practices themselves, Fenwick, Jensen and Nerland (2012) suggest that discursive practices seek to stabilize as, what can be termed, discursive resources (Rigg 2005) or structures that constitute the legitimized discourses of professional practice. Professional learning and development is concerned with the re-production of those deeper discursive structures and the identification and exclusion of 'illegitimate' discourses.

Bragd and others (2008) argue a discursive community is constituted by common meanings that develop through discursive interactions. So discourse can be treated as a collective endeavour created through interactions within an identifiable group of actors and texts rather than as the isolated acts of individuals (Dennen 2008). Thus, discourse is a mechanism that generates a 'feeling' of being part of a community through contributing to a particular discourse with particular uses and particular terms that are commonly understood as discursive resources (Rigg 2005), structures (Heracleous 2006) or repertoires (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). So a community is generated around some level of discursive structure that decentres the individual person to focus on networks of activity and influence (Fenwick, Jensen and Nerland 2012).

Furthermore, discursive communities not only reinforce common repertoires among members but also identify discourses that differentiate members from ‘others’ outside the community (Bragd, et al 2008). Hence discursive communities emerge through both collective meaning-making and processes of marginalisation and exclusion that ‘delegitimize’ ‘other’ discursive practices.

Discursive communities can then be seen as central to Mäkitalo’s (2012) processes of identifying what constitutes legitimate professional knowledge resources such as repertoires of specific vocabularies and dominant metaphors (Francis 2007). Rigg (2005) discusses how collective meanings within discourses becoming institutionalized as a common language and meaning-making enterprise within an organization. Such processes of institutionalization could also occur through networks of interaction permeating organizational boundaries (Jorgensen and Henriksen 2011) including, for example, professional communities (Wenger 1998). Hence, a professional ‘field’, in Bourdieu’s sense of the term, can be negotiated, refined and revised through ongoing social interaction and made identifiable by common discursive repertoires (Czarniawska 1997, 180).

Therefore, this research is concerned with how, in the context of an unstable and contested professional domain, a group of HRD practitioners engage in discursive practices and negotiate and renegotiate the discursive structures, repertoires or resources that constitute ‘HRD practice’.

The research site

According to the website, The Chat Diary (<http://www.thechatdiary.com/>), as of October 2013, there were in excess of 750 Twitter chat events covering a range of professional, health, recreational and specific community subjects. The professional orientated discussion events include almost all professional domains from financial and

businesses analysts, to brand management, communications, marketing and so forth often with a particular niche focus such as industry sector, location or practice (for example, HR and social media). From the breadth of chat events listed, two chat event communities were selected from a list of eight learning focused communities. The selection criteria were that:

- (1) the professional domain of the event was familiar to the researcher to avoid misunderstandings from, for example, the use of highly technical language;
- (2) the event was not limited to current or previous staff of a specific organization;
- (3) the event continues to take place on a regular basis and with a minimum of 20 participants per event; and
- (4) there was some evidence of the event being embedded in a wider web sphere as indicated by links into or out of the discursive events such that a “hypermedia discourse” (Shun 2007) could be identified.

From the first community selected, two of the events were chosen randomly from archives collected from the community website from a three-month period in 2011. These events addressed the themes of the use of metrics in HRD provision and the nature and experiences of networks and collaboration for HRD practices. The initial analysis of these Twitter events identified the key themes for this study of the discursive practices of identity construction and the development of discourse communities in virtual environments.

As a result of the findings from the two events, the main discussion event analysed and presented here was purposively sampled from the second discussion community as the topic of the discussion event was seen to potentially provide a rich source of data on professional identity construction and community formation. The second community selected describes itself as:

... for people interested in the topic of Learning ...[using] Twitter to ... explore and discuss how the social and business environment ... impacts learning ...

The Twitter chat events of this community occur fortnightly on a synchronous basis. The events are organised by nine individuals that include learning and development practitioners working in larger corporations, as well as independent consultants based in the UK and North America.

The main chat event (hereafter termed 'New Skills') took place in 2012 and was focused on the Learning and Performance Institute (LPI) capability framework. A number of the participants in the event contributed to the development of the framework or work for the LPI. This may underpin the positive presentation of the framework during the event and the lack of discussion of alternative frameworks.

The 'New Skills' event had 68 participants (N=68) predominately from North America, the UK and South Africa. The official event period of one hour saw 518 Tweets using the appropriate hashtag posted giving a mean average of 8.6 Tweets per minute (which was similar to the two earlier events with N=54 and N=72 and mean averages of 10.2 Tweets per minute and 8.6 Tweets per minute respectively).

It should be noted that the data boundaries of these online events cannot be clearly prescribed. Schneider and Foot (2005, 158) use the term web sphere to denote:

... not simply a collection of web sites, but as a set of dynamically defined digital resources spanning multiple websites deemed relevant or related to a central event, concept or theme.

So the research 'site' is itself a network of discursive practices, text items and images that constitute knowledge production, exchange and reflection (Mäkitalo 2012).

The 'New Skills' event was preceded by a brief discussion paper posted on the chat event website two days before the synchronous chat event itself. This paper summarized an online presentation from a leading HRD practitioner (Shepherd 2012), a

short blog post (Couzins 2012) as well as a practitioner-focused journal article (Robert-Edomi 2012).

Further contributions to the web sphere of the event include the posting to the event website of the transcript following the specific chat event. Participants also add the URLs to their personal and/ or professional or employer's websites as part of their introduction to the event. These URLs can often also be found in the participants' own Twitter profiles.

Participants in the event will also refer to other resources during the event by Tweeting URLs in the context of, for example, expanding on the topic of discussion beyond the 140-character limit of Twitter.

Some participants will post further reflections on the events in their own personal and/ or professional web sites and blogs. These reflections can often involve a form of retrospective coherence-making as part of that individual's personal professional development:

When reflecting on what I learned [during the event], I ...[review] the questions that were asked...

As well as including the re-presentation of participants' own texts:

... a number of people have picked up on some of my tweets, and the context in which they were made ... here are the questions and my ... tweets.

It is worth noting here that the 'people' referred to were probably not participants in the Twitter event itself but were Twitter 'followers' of the specific participant quoted.

These people would then have been able to see the event Tweets from that participant but possibly not viewed the event as a discrete entity. This in turn raises the issue of the meaning of being an 'event participant'. For example, in a number of instances, Tweets appeared to respond to discussions conducted over 30 minutes earlier in the chat event from individuals who had not made any previous contributions. These indicated that the 'participant' was probably not following the event hashtag but rather following one of

the other event participants and so was enrolled in to the New Skills chat event unconsciously. Yet such Tweets contributed to, and participated in, the event and so have been included in the analysis presented here.

Finally, other participants wrote blog posts to clarify or alter views expressed during the chat event:

During the chat, I shared [a] tweet ... [now], I'm not sure [it is correct], because [it indicates] we're altering the course ... [but] in many ways we just keep going in the same direction, often oblivious to potential changes in the road.

Thus, such Twitter events can be seen to have permeable boundaries where the web sphere of interest of the event is itself contestable and dynamic as participants engage in the re-presentation of the content and their inputs as well as reflecting on and altering previously expressed opinions.

Data analysis

The data was collected from transcripts available from the event website and analysed in two phases. The first phase of analysis was designed to provide a sense of the structure of the Twitter events by identifying the common building blocks of the discussion. This involved applying the functional categories identified by Belnap and Withers (2008) in analysing unstructured face-to-face learning events to the Twitter event transcripts. The categories of particular interest as the building blocks of exchanges include propositional statements and suggestions by participants. These could be linked together through statements that modify, clarify and assess the validity of preceding statements. It was notable that few explicit disagreements in the discussions were evident. Also of interest were restatements, given as Retweets (RTs) which can play an important function in Twitter discussions. RTs refer to the practice of 'forwarding' the message of another and is a common practice on Twitter in general. Boyd, Golder and Lotan (2010) identify a range of reasons for the use of RTs that

appear pertinent to the analysis here including: spreading a tweet to others; indicating support or homage; validating the comments of others; gaining prominence from more visible participants; repairing or reinitiating a sequence that had stalled; and finally to maintain a collective focus on the formal topic.

This analysis of the events identified an apparent exaggeration of many of the key problematic features of unstructured discussions identified by Belnap & Withers (2008, 8): sequences extending over many exchanges; overlapping exchanges and sequences; short sequences tending to be cut off prior to a conclusion; and sequences re-emerging later in discussions. However, this first phase of analysis was important in 'making sense' of the discussion event by identifying the sequences of exchanges.

Following the use of Belnap and Withers' (2008) functional categories to identify exchanges and sequences from the Twitter discussion, the more 'intense' exchange sequences that involved propositions that were linked and subject to assessment were then selected for further analysis. The content of these exchanges and sequences along with other content from the wider web sphere of blog posts, websites and multi media resources were iteratively coded using an abductive approach (Wodak 2004) between the concepts explored in the review of literature and the empirical data using NVIVO. The visual components of the data were treated in the same way as the text data (Prosser 2008). The data was initially subject to open coding through an initial reading of the sequence transcripts seeking themes and 'reportoires' in the data (Potter and Wetherell 1987). This was followed by theoretical thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998) guided by the main themes identified in the review of literature on individual and collective professional identity construction.

Given the findings of the phase one analysis of the discussion structure, the framing of HRD practices could not be identified through the development of a single

discourse object or Tweet but rather as an accumulation of micro-practices (Pachler & Daly 2009) as exchange sequences. Thus, a focus of analysis emerged on what Scardamalia & Bereitner (2008) termed 'ideational content' which refers to the linkages and patterns between utterances rather than specific text objects themselves.

The process of analysis was selected to explore and interpret the attempts to construct a collective definition and understanding of HRD practice. Given the highly interpretive nature of the discourse analysis a particular emphasis was placed on the quality criteria of accessibility and intelligibility of the analysis (Titscher et al 2000) tested through presentation of the emerging findings to academic and practitioner audiences (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009, 315). These presentations were followed by further iterations of analysis of the data informed by feedback from the audiences.

Limitations

The study presented in this paper is a small-scale exploratory study focussed on a purposive sample of one main Twitter event. The small data sample may exacerbate some of the issues in the central role of the researcher in discourse analysis in terms of researcher-bias (Bryman 2008) which is a particular issue given the multiple possible readings of a discourse (Gill 1996) and the dangers of over emphasising the significance of coherence and variations in the discourse (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009). Using the theoretical thematic analysis approach made explicit the interests of the researcher rather than presenting the findings as 'emerging from' the data (Ely et al 1997) while the presentations of earlier analysis of the data encouraged alternative possible interpretations to be identified.

Following this study, the researcher is currently collecting and analysing data from the two Twitter chat communities over a four month period. This will cover 24 discussion events and approximately 14,000 Tweets. This will provide opportunities to

test the extent to which the patterns of discourse structures and identity discourses are replicated over time and between the two different communities.

Ethical considerations

Researching Twitter chat events can pose a number of ethical issues that need to be addressed. These are captured in the AoIR policy, *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research* (AoIR 2012, 7) that states:

... privacy is a concept that must include a consideration of expectations and consensus. Social, academic, or regulatory delineations of public and private as a clearly recognizable binary no longer holds in everyday practice.

The Twitter chat events are public events open to anyone with a Twitter account and awareness that the event is occurring. The archives of each event require no more than internet access as these are kept on event websites and are again accessible to anyone. However, it can be argued that such communities rely on aspects of mutual trust and respect that may be undermined by a ‘lurking’ researcher (Eysenbach and Till 2001). So, the research presented here involved the use of publicly available chat archived transcripts that may be regarded as ‘public domain’ data (Androutsopoulos 2008). The research site was treated as taking place in a public space and individual explicit consent for participation was not sought and so participants have been made as unidentifiable as possible (Eysenbach and Till 2001). In addition, the event organizers were contacted to inform them of the research and provide an opportunity to raise objections to the research (AoIR 2012).

Furthermore, participant names have been altered although their essential content, structure and capitalisation has been retained including where a corporate or individual name has been used as well as the gender where indicated by that name. So, ‘TrainingPete’ is an anonymised Twitter name of a male participant who also demonstrated a clear professional label in that Twitter name. It does remain possible

that an altered name is identical to a name of one of the over 200 million active Twitter users worldwide but any such similarities are coincidental.

In addition, quotes from Tweets, but not from online articles, have been redacted so that their authorship is less easily traced through search engines but the meaning of the statement is retained. However, it is acknowledged that some quotations may remain traceable.

Framing Human Resource Development

To turn now to the analysis of the ‘New Skills’ chat event, we can start with the pre-discussion materials that set the context for the discussion topic itself. The pre-discussion post (Couzins 2012), the Training Journal article (Robert-Edomi 2012) and the online presentation (Shepherd 2012) collectively discuss human resource development practitioners as facing an almost unprecedented set of challenges. These challenges arise from changing working practices, the increasing pace and scale of organizational change and ever-tighter financial pressures that results in “our customers questioning the very basis of our [HRD] service offering” (Shepherd 2012).

The Training Journal article (Robert-Edomi 2012), quoted a Corporate Leadership Council report (un-referenced) that under 25% of respondents were satisfied with their company’s training courses:

... the same number felt that L&D had helped them achieve their business outcomes, and half of them would discourage colleagues from working with the L&D department.

The article goes on to quote a human resource development consultant that:

We do this often long-winded training needs analysis, design and delivery process that takes time - we don't have that time. Learning is going on every minute of the day - all the time - and we have to accept that and work out how we can leverage it to the best effect

This pre-discussion material for the ‘New Skills’ chat event can be seen as mobilising

particular discursive structures to emphasize that current HRD practice is failing in terms of business relevance and in terms of responding to the pace of change. Such a discourse develops a nuanced approach to the HRD Schools identified earlier. The promotion of an organizational and utilitarian focus on HRD practice is drawn from the U.S School. Yet, from that School, the discourses associated with the adoption of structured learning methodologies and a formal/ instructional approach to HRD are positioned as being part of the current problems facing the profession.

At the same time, the strategic focus of the European School is promoted in the event discussion alongside a constructivist view of learning that is indirectly managed and pluralist:

We need to think about the way in which humans learn: from the rich experiences we have, opportunities to practise deep and meaningful conversations and opportunities to reflect.

However, the U.S. School's economic discourse of performance is presented as dominating the discussion:

We're moving to a world that focuses on performance and experience. There is a productivity and performance focus, rather than just a learning focus,

The preamble blog post (Couzins 2012) for the New Skills chat event also reflects this dominance, stating:

Business agility and improved performance have become increasingly important. There is also recognition that an organization's learning strategy should to be aligned to business objectives with the focus moving from the L&D process to business outcomes

This economic and performative discourse (Gold, et al 2010) is articulated in to a capability framework developed by the Learning and Performance Institute (LPI) and underpins the preamble blog post. The LPI describes itself as:

The Learning and Performance Institute is a global Institute for Learning & Development professionals. Established in 1995 the Institute has grown on an annual basis to become the leading authority on Learning & Development.

Its' corporate brochure is titled "Performance through Learning" suggesting that

learning is subservient to, or only of value in, the context of performance.

The LPI Capability Map (or framework) (Learning & Performance Institute) consists of 27 skills across nine different categories including traditional HRD categories such as the live delivery of face-to-face learning interventions as well as newer skills areas supporting collaborative learning.

Table 2: Learning & Performance Institute Capability Map

Live delivering	Learning Resources	Performance improvement
Presentation delivery Face-to-face learning Virtual/ distance learning	Design Content creation	Performance support Coaching Mentoring
Collaborative learning	Analysis & strategy	Learning information management & interpretation
Supporting work-teams Supporting communities of Practice (CoP) Supporting content co-creation and curation Developing collaborative learning skills	Performance analysis Competency management Assessment and evaluation Learning strategy	Information architecture Data interpretation
Learning delivery management	Managing the learning function	Business skills and intelligence
Project management Change management	People management and development Process management and improvement Resource management	Financial management Procurement Communication, marketing and relationship management Industry awareness

Source: adapted by the author from Learning and Performance Institute.

Presented as a strength of the Capability Map is the statement that it has been developed by “leading experts in the industry”. This is a similar claim to that made by the UK’s Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (Stewart and Sambrook 2012) and arguably, reinforces Dirkx’s (2008) idea of the “narrative of

practice”. However, the claims of the Capability Map (and other similar frameworks) also seemingly reject the notion of the hologram metaphor of HRD. According to the LPI map, HRD practice is not an unstable or disputed domain of complex competing perspectives and dynamics highly contingent on where and when it is being practiced. Rather, HRD practice can be simplified as a toolkit of instructions to be consumed and applied regardless of context (Gabriel 2002). Thus the ‘narratives’ of HRD practice are presented as clear, stable and unambiguous.

From this initial framing of the ‘New Skills’ chat event, the discursive resources of the U.S performance-based approach to HRD practice (Gold, et al 2010) appears initially to have been adopted by the chat event participants:

Table 3

1.	TrainingPete	... less focus on ‘training’ and more focus on ‘performance support’. #...
2.	JoanMar2	... Yes, ... We need to [show] measureable ROI and performance improvement #...
3.	TrainingPete	First thing is a new mindset [and by asking what is] the least intrusive way to address [a] performance issue? #...
4.	ILPT	#... set performance ... objectives ... measure against those [do not] just track learning activity #wasteoftime

Source: ‘New Skills’ Twitter chat event

Tweets 1 – 3 place the emphasis on a performative discourse in terms of changes in professional practice. In particular, Tweet 1 presents a change of emphasis rather than a fundamental change of the practitioner discourse. Tweets 2 – 3 appear to suggest a mobilisation of the discourse repertoire of performance as the necessary means of addressing the challenges faced by practitioners. Furthermore, Tweet 4 can be seen as an attempt to position the discourse structure of performance as a legitimated

professional knowledge and discursive resource (Mäkitalo 2012) with alternatives being dismissed as “a waste of time”.

Yet, a more nuanced positioning between the U.S. and European Schools could be seen to emerge in the discussion. One participant Tweeted the URL for a blog post of theirs during the event that made the argument that all that HRD functions should be concerned with is organizational performance. However, the competing concerns with individual development and skills acquisition were acknowledged as important aspects of HRD practice but these, it was argued, should be the responsibility of the individual rather than the employer and HRD department. The blog post argued that individual portfolios of competence and learning are key to future employability of workers and that through new technology some HRD practices could and should be re-situated outside the boundaries of the organization as the responsibility of the individual.

Furthermore, the expansive and generative aspects of the hologram metaphor (McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson 2001) appear to be accepted within the communicative actions of the chat event. The boundaries of HRD practice appeared to be perceived as flexible and interdisciplinary with participants citing the application of neuroscience, user-experience (UX) design and online community management as new areas in their practice.

The initial blog post introducing the ‘New Skills’ chat event also framed the discussion in terms of HRD practitioners being at a crossroads, with notions of a limited choice of directions. The crossroads metaphor is presented as a ‘choice’ for HRD practitioners to either collectively choose to respond effectively to these challenges or to risk “becoming a deadweight”. The Training Journal (Robert-Edomi 2012) implies the risk to HRD practitioners is in becoming an irrelevance to the organization, again

reinforcing the notion that HRD should adopt the economic discourses of the organizational orientation, bottom-line contribution and outcome focused practices.

However, the event participants did not unquestioningly accept the metaphor of being at a crossroads or that this is currently a period of particular pressure for the profession. It was asserted that this situation is not new for HRD but rather that:

Table 4

1.	KgeeVeeranki	L&D has been at a crossroads for over a decade...most ... ignored it #...
2.	TrainingPete	We've been at crossroads numerous times, we just keep making the wrong turn #...

Source: 'New Skills' Twitter chat event

On reflecting on Tweet 2 in a later blog post, the participant changed their position arguing that rather than choosing an incorrect direction of change, HRD practices were simply failing to change direction in response to changing organizational needs at all. So that the view expressed in Tweet 2 was later revised to align with that expressed in Tweet 1 that the practices of many HRD professional has not changed despite pressures to do so. This aligns with other assertions (Robert-Edomi 2012) that:

There was a need for speed and agility in today's organizations, and for L&D professionals to support them in being agile and responsive. But traditional approaches to learning were slow and unresponsive, making people wait for the information they needed rather than giving it to them when they really needed it.

To further emphasise the hopelessly out-of-date nature of these 'traditional' approaches to learning and development one participant posted an image of a classroom from 1910. The image presented was one of passive learning with the pupils' facial features blurred in a way that seemed to emphasise the impersonal and anti-individual nature of systematic learning design methods. The image was used to support the critical emerging discursive repertoires on off-the-job formal and instructional training:

Table 5

1.	RobThomson007	This is why we need to move on and develop new skills ... http://t.co/pJY2nAs1 #...
2.	jpamelaw	RT @RobThomson007: This is why we need to move on and develop new skills ... http://t.co/XcJnnbKg < Haha! Indeed! #...
3.	jpamelaw	@RobThomson007 Did you come with that image ready ... or are you just a v. proficient Googler? #...
4.	sharonbrown	@jpamelaw @RobThomson007 TOO funny! #...
5.	RobThomson007	@jpamelaw a key skill is to find things at point of need and know where to look #...
6.	johnlearn	@s_armet @RobThomson007 Sounds like a good thing to change. Ditch the “class room”, perhaps. #...
7.	RobThomson007	@s_armet @johnlearn yep why do you need to be ‘in’ the classroom what can’t be achieved using other techniques? #...

Source: ‘New Skills’ Twitter chat event

This is one single example of the ‘need for change’ discourse that was widely adopted by the participants and often framed in terms of the opportunities, both personal and organizational, that such change may bring. This was expressed in terms of the opportunities associated with choosing the ‘right’ turn as in Table 5 above or with the range and diversity of opportunities for development in and of the profession:

Not so much a crossroads, more of a spaghetti junction. So much opportunity to change.

The spaghetti metaphor mirrors the diversity and holographic nature of the HRD domain noted in the academic literature (McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson 2001). So we see the discourse shift away from a simplistic and linear notion of change in direction implied in the crossroad metaphor, to more complex notions of experimentation and of a learning process in untangling the spaghetti of possibilities:

... taking wrong turns is part of finding your way ... Mistakes are all part of the learning process

So the central metaphor of the ‘New Skills’ chat event of HRD being at a crossroads is destabilized through the course of the discussion. Yet, the discourses of change are

clearly stabilized and reproduced as discursive repertoires of the professional community. The following sequence goes further in emphasising the ‘naturalness’ of change by asserting that HRD functions (L&D departments) are no different from any other function: change is an organizational norm.

Table 6

1.	edwardmcnally	...It’s not just L&D though, most functions are having to re-evaluate what they do and how they do it – marketing, IT etc #...
2.	sorrelathomson	RT @edwardmcnally: ...Its not just L&D though, most functions are having to re-evaluate < agreed ...! #...
3.	ClairRussell	The state of L&D is no diff to the state of all departments – greater scrutiny and justification of where everyone brings value #...

Source: ‘New Skills’ Twitter chat event

Throughout the ‘New Skills’ event was a sense of HRD practitioners failing to keep pace with the learning practices of employees: that HRD professionals were failing to change their practices to meet the changing behaviours of employees in organizations in respect of learning and development. This concern was also reflected in one of the other Twitter chat events where it was stated that ‘traditional’ HRD provision of learning and employee development was not important to businesses while “positive performance change” was seen as important. So a discursive structure of being in deficit to, or lagging behind, others can be identified in the discourses of HRD practice.

The pace of change

The institutionalized discourse of constant change was also combined with an emphasis on a specific discourse on the pace of change initiated in the ‘New Skills’ chat event pre-discussion texts including the Training Journal article (Robert-Edomi 2012) and the expert presentation (Shepherd 2012). Both these ‘texts’ used images emphasising technology and speed of movement. The Training Journal (Robert-Edomi 2012) used

images to convey a sense of both the speed of technology-led change along with a sense of such change being inevitable and unstoppable, impervious to human agency.

Similarly, the expert presentation (Shepherd 2012) uses a combination of natural images of the sky and trees alongside ‘high tech’ images of jet planes and chrome that emphasizes change and technology as natural components of working contexts.

HRD practice is presented as subservient to a new-capitalist discourse that emphasizes adaptability, innovation and speed (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996). For HRD to realise its potential impact on organizations, the discourse within the Twitter event clearly perceives speed as a positive, or at least, ‘natural’ phenomenon to be embraced uncritically. Hence speed is attributed positive cultural value (Tomlinson 2007). Yet speed is also something to fear: many HRD practices are discursively constituted as failing to change at the pace they should.

Table 7

1.	TrainingPete	... There [is] a growing [awareness] that traditional L&D approaches do not move at the speed of business. #...
2.	KgeeVeeranki	... it's not that we don't move at the speed of biz, it's that we tend to avoid/ignore business issues (at our peril) #...
3.	johnlearn	Yes indeed! RT @TrainingPete: ... There [is] a growing [awareness] that traditional L&D approaches do not move at the speed of business. #...

Source: ‘New Skills’ Twitter chat event

In Table 7 we see two discourses presented on HRD practices being in deficit to ‘business’. Tweets 1 and 3 promote the idea of HRD as being historically slow to react to emerging ‘business need’. However, Tweet 2, constitutes this as not an issue of speed but rather of trajectory where HRD has a tendency to fail to align to ‘business needs’ and therefore, by implication, was not perceived to be providing value to the business.

The intertwining of these discourses of technology, speed, trajectory and performativity can be seen as mutually reinforcing (Luke 1997). Throughout the Twitter

chat event, the discourse of speed and the pace of change were legitimized as a discursive resource of the community and perceived as central to effective HRD practices. Any tension between the focus on speed and the need for temporal space, a pause, for the sorts of reflection (Jackson and McDowell 2000) suggested as necessary for the professional practitioner to select the ‘correct way’ at the crossroads was not raised or discussed.

So the ‘New Skills’ chat event places HRD practices as being in deficit to a scale, scope and pace of change that has been more readily adapted to and adopted by other professions and the wider ‘business’.

Community formation

It can be argued that in the discourses of a performance-focussed HRD, the perceived need for constant organizational change at speed and of a professional practice failing to ‘keep pace’ with such changes are seen as providing stable discursive resources (Rigg and Trehan 2002) that assemble a discourse community. The discursive resources provide a thematic coherence, or repertoires, to the event community (Bloome, et al 2005). Alongside these resources of coherence-making it is also helpful to examine how differences are treated within the emergent discussion community. Fairclough (2003, 41-2) identified five approaches to the treatment of differences in discourse:

...(a) an openness to, acceptance of, recognition of difference; an exploration of difference, as in ‘dialogue in the richest sense of the term; (b) an accentuation of difference, conflict, polemic; a struggle over meaning, norms, power; (c) an attempt to resolve or overcome difference; (d) a bracketing of difference, a focus on commonality, solidarity; (e) consensus; a normalisation and acceptance of differences of power which brackets or suppresses differences of meaning and norms.

While intense discursive struggles (Bragd, et al 2008) did not appear occur in the ‘New Skills’ chat event, examples of the exclusion of alternative translations could be seen to occur:

Table 8

1.	sharonbrown	...Less focus on training and more focus on performance support. #...
2.	johnlearn	@sharonbrown You consider that a more recent personal evolution? #... I admit I'm surprised.
3.	sharonbrown	@marklearns No, but it is speeding up. You? #...
4.	johnlearn	@sharonbrown I suppose there's a tacit acknowledgement, but I figured your Educational credentials would have cemented it sooner #...
5.	sharonbrown	@johnlearn: Nah. #...

Source: 'New Skills' Twitter chat event

In this excerpt that is a sequence in response to the moderator's question on recent changes in practice, there is a note of surprise expressed in Tweet 2 that a shift to practices of performance support is viewed as recent. That viewpoint falls outside the dominant discourse of the event and is then, to an extent, withdrawn (Tweet 3). This withdrawal is then reinforced in Tweet 4 with the implication that a 'qualified' professional should have understood this reality sooner and this reinforcement is accepted in Tweet 5 and the sequence closed.

Other areas of discussion led to more explicit negotiation of discourse repertoires. The following sequence follows a discussion on the role of learning in developing the skills, capabilities and competences of HRD practitioners in responding to change:

Table 9

1.	edwardmcnally	...taking wrong turns is part of finding your way though. Mistakes are all part of the learning process
2.	abarr5	RT @edwardmcnally: ...taking wrong turns is part of finding your way though. Mistakes are all part of the learning process
3.	norahfraskou	MT @edwardmcnally: ... taking wrong turns is part of finding your way tho. Mistakes r part of lrng process < if learn from them
4.	s_armet	.@edwardmcnally Completely agree, failure is a fantastic teacher ;) #...
5.	acp34	... Continually learning from mistakes slows us down ... need to practice success to keep up [this could be the] cause of L&D problem? #...

Source: 'New Skills' Twitter chat event

Tweet 1 gives a clear statement on the value of mistakes as part of the learning process. A view that assembles support in Tweets 2 and 3, albeit with Tweet 3 emphasising the need for actual learning to be derived from those mistakes if they are to be of value. However, Tweet 5 rejects enrolment to that particular stance but rather positions it as an component of the discursive practices that undermine wider perceptions of the value of HRD within organizations. Yet, rather than stimulate further debate, the discussion moves on and no attempt is made at negotiating a common discursive stance to locate 'learning from mistakes' as a discursive resource of the community.

Discursive repertoires were assembled over the course of the event that sought to self-identity the discourse community as distinct from particular 'others' and to accentuate and also bracket away difference. So, the discursive actions in the 'New Skills' event refer to the expectations and demands of managers as holding back the development of effective and 'modern' HRD practice. Sequences refer to the key constraint faced by HRD practitioners as being the current 'thought processes' within

organizations. These constraining thought processes get articulated into the inflexible and systematic learning design methods decried earlier:

Table 10

1.	KgeeVeeranki	... “on-demand” learning solutions “identify, learn, apply” in short time frames...rinse, repeat
2.	ILPT	@KgeeVeeranki Most orgs want a “command and control” ... training model – as that is how it has [always been] done #...

Source: ‘New Skills’ Twitter chat event

The demands of managers become articulated and materialized as the key metrics that HRD professionals work to. These include measures of completion rates or hours of training delivered rather than the outcome focused, economic, bottom-line and utilitarian measures anticipated in the performance focused U.S. School of HRD practice. This was summarized in the chat event as: “measurement without cause, order-taking without reason” that indicate HRD practices that are not of value, that, in effect, lack legitimacy as professional practices.

A more nuanced and complex discussion of the problems of HRD practice began to emerge in the discussion. So members of this discursive community were identified as understanding and wanting to change and needing to persuade their organization and other departments to modify their expectations. Yet there were implicitly ‘other’ HRD practitioners who were not able to move away from the formal and instructional practices of ‘traditional’ HRD through fear and ignorance. So the event HRD community identified itself simultaneously as being part of the traditional HRD community lagging behind ‘the business’ but also distinct from the community as they present themselves as demonstrating aspects of newer and progressive HRD practices.

Conclusions

This paper presents an investigation of the discursive practices of HRD practitioners in an open online environment and how such discursive practices emerge to scope and define HRD as a domain of practice. It is suggested that among practitioners that there has been little change from the situation identified by Walton (1999) of HRD seeking to make sense of itself through a contested accumulation of diverse practices. Hence, the discourses identified in this paper suggest that HRD practice remains elusive (McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson 2001). While initially using the categorisation of U.S or European Schools of HRD (McGuire, et al 2001), the analysis of this specific Twitter discussion forum indicated that the discourse of practitioners had moved away from this binary structuring. Performance outcomes associated with the U.S. School were partially to be delivered through adopting practices more associated with the European School involving skills acquisition, constructivist and informal learning indicating indirectly managed HRD practices that are strategically and process focused.

Furthermore, alongside the dynamic nature of the negotiation of this binary structure, there could also be seen an emergent expansion of the concepts and theories ‘drawn in’ to the discourses of HRD practice. So the discursive practices examined here suggest HRD practice is in an “interactive moment” (Shotter 1993, 3) providing spaces of negotiation, translation and tensions. Such tensions (Antonacopoulou 2005, 5):

... capture both the socio-political forces as well as the ‘elasticity’ and fluidity of organizing as different processes and practices connect to provide new possibilities.

HRD practice can be positioned in tension between the generative metaphor of the hologram (McGoldrick, Stewart and Watson 2001) and a restrictive discourse of practice recipes to be implemented (Gabriel 2002). Thus, the discourse practices of the chat event encouraged a conceptual bricolage as HRD practitioners ‘bring in’ an ever-

widening range of concepts, tools and approaches (Gabriel 2002) to HRD practice. But, discursive practices also involved a “co-ordinated management of meaning” (Oswick and Robertson 2009, 186) in a programmatic (Grabriel 2002) framing of HRD practice presented through ‘capability maps’ and HRD ‘solutions’ that were phrased as “rinse and repeat” approaches to practice routines.

This framing of HRD was also achieved through positioning HRD practice as being in a self-created crisis: that it is failing to meet the expectations of management and failed to change in response to changes in the business environment. Yet, as the discourse developed, so the meaning of the crisis itself became re-presented in repertoires concerning barriers to the emergence of better HRD practices. Such barriers included ‘command and control’ management; specific performance measurement practices within organizations; and, in particular, ‘other’ traditional HRD practitioners holding on to outmoded concepts and modes of delivery. Thus, the discursive practices presented in this specific event tended to constitute the participants as ‘performing the solutions’ to the problems and challenges faced by HRD practices as a whole: that as a community, they specifically are engaged in finding the way for HRD practice to make sense of itself.

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